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LECTURE

ON

THE ENGLISH DRAMA.

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THE

NATURE AND STATE

OF

THE ENGLISH DRAMA.

A Lecture

DELIVERED AT A MEETING OF THE

SYNCRETIC ASSOCIATION,

AT THE

GALLERY OF BRITISH ARTISTS, SUFFOLK STREET,

ON

THURSDAY, JANUARY 28th, 1841.

BY F. G. TOMLINS,

SECRETARY TO THE SHAKESPEARE SOCIETY, AUTHOR OF "THE PAST AND PRESENT STATE OF DRAMATIC ART, AND LITERATURE," "A BRIEF VIEW OF THE ENGLISH DRAMA," ETC.

LONDON:

C. MITCHELL, RED LION COURT, FLEET STREET.

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ADVERTISEMENT.

HAVING been very urgently requested to publish this outline, I have done so without alteration or amendment. It will be perceived by those who have honoured me with a perusal of my former works on the same subject,* that I have incorporated a small portion of them in the present Lecture. Having to state the same facts, it seemed needless to alter the phraseology. I have not marked them as quotations, as they are my own property; but I have, however, carefully noted any selections from other authors.

The very cordial manner with which this Lecture was received, and the attention the subject has attained with men of acknowledged genius and power, is a sufficient reward for my continuous though comparatively trifling efforts in the cause.

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* "The Past and Present State of Dramatic Art and Literature," 1839, 8vo., price 1*s*. Mitchell.

"A Brief View of the English Drama, from the earliest period to the present time; with Suggestions for elevating the present Condition of the Art and its Professors," 1840, foolscap 8vo., price 4*s*. bound. Mitchell.

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"Full little knowest thou that hast not tride,
What hell it is in suing long to bide;
To lose good days that might be better spent,
To waste long nights in pensive discontent;
To speed to-day, to be put back to-morrow;
To feed on hope, to pine with fear and sorrow;
To fret thy soul with crosses and with cares;
To eat thy heart through comfortless despairs;
To fawn, to crouch, to wait, to ride, to ronne,
To spend, to give, to want, to be undonne."

SPENSER.

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A LECTURE,

&c.

THE nature and state of the English Drama doubtless appears to the majority of those who glanced at the advertisement by which this Lecture was announced, as a very trifling subject, more especially so at a time when the *nature* and *state* of the cotton manufactures, or the *nature* and *state* of taxation and colonization, engross the attention of the statesman and the man of business. I doubtlessly run the risk of being considered a trifler and an enthusiast for devoting attention to what such minds are pleased to denominate a mere amusement—at the best only harmless, and at the worst demoralizing in the extreme. To such reasoners it would seem the height of absurdity if I asserted that *my* theme was as important as *theirs*. That the consideration of *my* subject was likely to prove *as* beneficial to the large family of mankind, and that results *as* mighty would be produced by its proper adjustment.

Were I to utter this at the Corn Exchange, or in Westminster Hall, I should be esteemed a man incapable of valuing the relative powers of things. A visionary heated by the continued contemplation of one subject into a diseased state of mental optics. But the only difference between us would be that they would look to *immediate* results, and I to more *remote*. They contemplate only one stage of the great journey of existence, and I several.

Let us examine how men are operated upon in the formation of character. Certainly not in a direct manner. Law may prevent a man committing murder: but law will never make him benevolent. Law may make the Tartar-barbarian a Chinese-insipidity; but it would never make him an ancient Grecian or a modern Englishman. No! the exercise of one power of one soul can never affect the whole powers of another soul—the mere exercise of the understanding or reasoning faculty of one

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man will but operate on the reasoning faculty of another. Imagination will kindle imagination. The affections will but arouse the affections. To touch the entire soul of man, or (to use the splendid phrase of one of our living unheeded dramatists,) to "shake with corresponding fire the Promethean tree that ramifies throughout our mortal being," the *whole* of the powers of the soul must be brought into simultaneous action—and the faculty of doing this has been named genius. This full and complete exercise of the soul—this happy concord of the three estates of man—is given but to the poet; and to him only in moments of inspiration—when the thrilling unition of his powers produces a harmony divine and everlasting. Then his hallowed words penetrate the elemental being of each spiritual existence, and "one touch of nature makes the whole world kin."

And to what class of poet is this entire exercise of his powers so absolutely necessary as to the Dramatist. His region is more extended than any other. He soars into the limitless star-lit region above—he scours the endless plain of the earth—he dives into the fathomless abysses beneath it. He reads the heart of man in all its sizes and varieties—he is equally at home in the busy mart of merchants as in the gorgeous palaces of kings—he revels with the vicious—he broods in heavenly silence with the pure—by the comprehensiveness of his sympathies—by the effulgence of his imagination—by the acuteness of his understanding—he embraces the whole circle of humanity, and himself a perfect type, he comprehends the fragmentary portions as developed in individuals.

Thus Shakespeare is greater than Sir Robert Peel—thus Lear is more important than the Bank Restriction Act. The one gives an impetus to eternal mind, the other to variable matter. The one may make some richer, but the other tends to make all happier.

Who then after all is the greatest legislator—the Poet or the Chancellor of the Exchequer? who has had most effect on the destinies of the human race—Mr. Wordsworth or Mr. Spring Rice?

But can any one be brought to really believe that the former is truly greater than the other?—the one only publishes little volumes of poems—lives in a country cottage by the side of a lake serene as his own soul—is plain Mr. Wordsworth, and moreover a kind of tax gatherer—the other is a peer of the realm. His door is beset with equipages—his mansion is the seat of

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luxury—his every word is an oracle to the moneyed men. He is great by position—the councillor of Princes—the controller of Lords—what can poor unreflecting human nature do but think him much more important to society than the retired tax-gatherer.

I have been obliged to say all this to meet the charge that the Dramatist is a Merry Andrew. That the Drama is a *mere* amusement. That it is ornamental but not necessary. That it is pleasing but not useful.

Sheridan's bon-mot, like all bon-mots, contained a portion of truth. It was to this effect. "I fear very much," said he, "that men go to the theatre to be amused." He need not have feared it—it is the greatest claim that the Drama has, that men frequent it for amusement. "They who come to scoff, remain to pray." They who come from idleness, may be made industrious against their intention. They may attain the highest kind of industry, the industry of the mind. Thoughts are potent over thoughts—the seeds scattered carelessly by the wind, produce mighty trees, whereof goodly ships may be fashioned and noble structures raised.

It will be seen, then, that I claim for the poet, and the dramatic poet more particularly, his ancient office of *teacher*: that is, legislator of the highest kind,—not the mere *governor* who effects the fulfilment of his desires by physical power, but the precursor of this mere officer—the natural governor—the one, who by the superiority of his nature, commands by his own unaided power—who wants not lictors or headsmen to precede or follow him. Who disdains the use of external power to carry out his decree—who seeks not to coerce the will, but who commands it. All power is derivable from, and depends on mental power. "E'er human statute purged the common weal," this power must have existed. Nations who have not had such legislators, are still barbarians; and it is a fact worthy of notice, that nations who do not possess this vivifying power in themselves, perish before an artificial and external civilization. The Red Indian perishes before the laws of the trading congress of the United States. His race is rapidly waning from the human family. The Teutonic nations, on the contrary, vivified by its poetic legislators, withstood, and ultimately triumphed over the assaults of physical Rome; vindicating their own innate mental power, and giving to mankind a new era in the history and destiny of our kind.

In the first age of society, the poet is the governor. In

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time, however, the very machinery he has raised operates against himself. The instruments he has invented are esteemed mightier than himself. The frailty of human intellect runs into superstition, and he who wields the power commands the homage. The machine once in motion, proceeds blindly in its functions, and its originator is no longer considered. Then the officer is thought greater than he who created him. The office itself is venerated, and the maker, that is the poet, is deposed. There is but one descent for princes; they step from the throne to the dungeon. The poet, the complete type of humanity, has now to contend with superstition and its tyrant-child, custom. Physical power is brought against him, and the rack, the furnace, and the dungeon, are often arrayed against him and his opinions. Instead of uttering his oracles from an eminence, to hearts willing to receive them, he speaks from the lowest place to a crowd sophisticated and debased by its appetites and its fears. Poetry, from a throne, has now passed to a garret. It must now make its way by the slowest degrees, and in the humblest tones. At the best it is but considered an entertainment. It is told that it is visionary. That nothing can be done but what has been done. That all things have been measured, and the final limits attained. But does it, therefore, give up its spirit world-worn and exhausted. No! It still predominates. It still scatters the seeds of thought—it still promulgates new truths—it still pours into the waters of existence the vivifying essence that purifies and perpetuates them. What has taken the rack from our Tower? What has taken the fleshless sculls from Temple-bar?—the divine influence of poetry, whether expressed in prose or verse; which, searching the entire man, has purged the spirit of its demoniac particles by moving its sympathies, kindling its intellect, convincing its understanding, and guiding its will. Can logic do this? Can law do this? Can mere faith in a doctrine do this? No! nothing but the exercise of the complete functions of the spiritual man can do this; and in doing this, the purest form of religion is expressed. The New Testament does all this, and is a divine poem, from one end to the other.

Surely, then, we shall not hear from those who reflect, that the poet's art is one of mere amusement. If more homely reasoning is required, let them consider from whence the developement of new principles are derived—from whence the arguments and illustrations of the

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senate, the bar, the pulpit, and even of literal science are taken.

What a powerful suggester is a high play!—how it invigorates the intellect!—how it moves the soul!—what new trains of thought does it suggest, operating on the varying intellect of its audience. Even in bare precepts, how it enriches the formula of morality. It is vain to say many never heed it—many never are moved who witness it—that vice is pursued in its presence, and those who repeat its words are regardless of their import. Murders have been committed in churches, poison has been administered in the sacrament, yet religion is holy; and will, and does, redeem mankind. As a direct means, a great play can expect to do nothing, for it is not a particular invention adapted to a particular set of circumstances. "Guilty creatures sitting at a play," may, by a very fortuitous conjunction of circumstances, find their own individual story told; but this is not the end or aim of the Drama. It is by its silent purgation of the mind and the will it operates,—it is by its subtle permeation through the region of mind that its cures are effected, and its purifying influences developed. And it is by this silent operation of the Dramatist, that he becomes a power, and that the exercise of his office is elevated above that of a mere amusement.

Another, and much lower ground may be also taken to demand your attention to the Drama, even supposing it can be nothing more than an elegant amusement.

What is amusing in its effect, may be grave in its producing. If plays are only amusing to audiences, they are very serious matters to authors. They are things of great skill and labour; very cunningly devised, and very curiously constructed; and as a mere piece of mechanism, are very well worth the examination of the inquirer. Every rational mind, after it has derived delight from a thing, feels curious as to its nature and construction; and men may well do so of an art which has exercised the attention, and excited the emulation of superior intelligences, from Aristotle to Horace, and from Gregory Nazianzen to Lord Melbourne—including Scott, Byron, Shelley, and Coleridge.

When I speak of the English Drama, of course I mean the Shakespearian, more especially as the present time does not afford opportunity to notice the infinite variety of theatrical entertainments. The Elizabethan Drama is undoubtedly the national form, as derived from the cha-

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racter and genius of our race, and to give a just idea of its nature, it will be necessary to glance at its origin and progress.

St. Augustin, who died about A.D. 430, refers in his writings to heathen theatrical exhibitions as still in existence, and of course condemns them, as well for their licentiousness as for their connection with idolatry. Gregory Nazianzen, an earlier father of the church, however, is said, nearly a century before, to have constructed a drama on the Passion of Christ, to counteract the profanities of the heathen stage; and thus to have laid the foundation of the modern romantic drama. This, however, appears not to be by any means proved, but it seems exceedingly probable that the ministers of the Christian religion, who were able and politic, as well as pious men, should contrive to turn the inordinate love of public exhibitions inherent in the Greek and Roman nations into a channel that would aid the extension of Christian doctrines.

The rapidly increasing decay of the empire after the fourth century, and the corruption of ancient manners by the influx of successive barbarous nations, has involved the three following centuries in the dunnest obscurity, and left us little means of ascertaining its physical or intellectual condition. In the year 990, a patriarch of Constantinople, named Theophylact, is said to have invented some kind of theatrical exhibitions, which, though meant, or pretending, to honour God and the saints, were thought by his more sedate contemporaries to dishonour and scandalize them. At the end of the 12th century we find Fitzstephen, in his "Life of Thomas à Becket," asserting "that London had for its theatrical exhibition holy plays, and the representation of miracles wrought by sacred confessors, or representations of the agonies whereby the faith of martyrs had been glorified." Hereafter we appear to have a more steady light to guide our progress, and it is indisputably proved that this kind of drama had become widely spread and firmly established, by the *Chester Mysteries*, which were performed toward the latter part of the 13th century, about 1270. Of these productions manuscript copies have come down to us, though probably not in the state they were originally composed. Mr. Payne Collier (to whom all lovers of the drama and of literary antiquities are deeply indebted) thinks they were originally written in French. In speaking of these kinds of productions, he says, "In their earliest state these pieces were of the simplest construction, merely following the incidents of Scripture or of the Pseudo-evangelium, the

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dialogue being maintained by the characters there introduced. By degrees, however, more invention was displayed, particularly with reference to the persons concerned in the conduct of the story." He also tells us that, "Besides a few other single pieces, there exist in this country three sets of miracle plays, which go through the principal incidents of the Old and New Testaments." These collections are "The Towneley," comprising thirty plays; "The Coventry," consisting of forty-two plays; and "The Chester," possessing twenty-four. The titles of a few will give some idea of their nature. In "The Coventry" are—*The Creation, The Fall of Man, The Death of Abel, Noah's Flood, Abraham's Sacrifice, Moses and the Ten Tables, The Genealogy of Christ, Pilate's Wife's Dream, &c.*

As miracle plays were originated by the ecclesiastics as a rude mode of exciting the admiration, and fixing the attention of a barbarous populace on the great events of the creed they taught, so they were at first principally enacted by them. In process of time, however, this duty was transferred to the guilds of artisans of various cities, who performed them, no doubt, as a species of agreeable devotion, and who, while thus manifesting the fervour of their faith, relieved the ecclesiastics of considerable expense. They were performed on stages or scaffolds, and had many rude mechanical contrivances to aid their representation, and lasted many hours for successive days. The actors were numerous and the pageants costly. The language is so homely as to appear absurd and almost blasphemous to us at the present day; but as Mr. Collier says, "In judging of the form, incidents, and language of these productions, we must, of course, carry our minds back to the period when they were written; we shall find then, that much that now seems absurd, ludicrous, and profane, was then pious, awful, and impressive." It appears they introduced comic matter or music to enliven them. As these curious productions had a great operation in moulding the tastes of the audience who were subsequently to foster the modern drama, and in directing the genius of the great dramatic authors who laid the foundation of our national theatre, it may not be uninteresting to give, from Mr. Collier, a slight sketch of one of them:—

"The first play, or pageant, of the Widkirk Collection, includes The Creation, with the rebellion and expulsion of *Lucifer* and his adherents. The *Deity* thus commences:—

'Ego sum alpha et o:
I am the first the last also,

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Oone God in majestie,
Mervelus of myght most,
Fader and son and hooly goost,
On God and trinyte.'

"The work of creation is then begun, and, after the *Cherubim* have sung, the *Deity* descends from his throne and goes out; *Lucifer* usurps it, and asks the *Angels*—

"'Say, felows, how semys now me,
To sit in seyte of trynyty?
I am so bright of ich a lym,
I trow me seme as well as him.'"

The good and bad angels disagree as to his appearance; but the dispute is terminated by the return of the *Deity*, who expels Satan and his adherents from heaven. Adam and Eve are then created in Paradise, and this piece ends with a speech from Satan, lamenting their felicity.

This, and even passages more opposed to our notions, that may be found in these old productions, cannot be looked upon as intentionally blasphemous or indecorous. They have been sadly misapprehended by modern writers, and one of the latest fears that "the bonds of ecclesiastical discipline must have been dissolved when such horrors could be allowed." I cannot see any thing to indicate it; on the contrary, we may be sure, from the very persons who conducted and produced them, that they saw nothing in them to wound the feelings of the pious, or bring religious sentiments into contempt. They seem to me to be only "old and plain," and "silly sooth, and to dally with the innocence of truth like the old age." There then was an abiding *faith* that could bear to deal strongly and literally with truth. Though its images were more homely, the conception was probably stronger than in the present time, when the imagination, where there is any, is sublimed into a rapturous frenzy, or, in the absence of that, the notions are abstracted into logical diagrams.

Miracle plays, which we have seen were certainly in full existence in Stephen's time, seemed to have increased in popularity until the reign of Henry VI., when a very important change took place in them by the introduction of a class of allegorical characters, whereas in the early miracle plays none but scripture characters were personated. These allegorical, or symbolical, characters were no doubt introduced to vary the sameness of the scripture characters, which probably had been nearly exhausted by successive writers. Whatever may have been their motive for their introduction, we find them gradually creeping on the stage

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until they at last entirely usurped the place of their predecessors.

Mr. Collier defines a Morality as "a drama, the characters of which are allegorical, abstract, or symbolical, and the story of which is intended to convey a lesson for the better conduct of human life." They were acted on the same kind of stages as the miracle plays, and, like them, had many characters, considerable machinery, and numerous properties. *The Castle of Perseverance*, one of the earliest representations of the kind, had 36 characters; amongst which were *Mundus, Belial, Caro, Humanus Gens, Stultitia, Voluptas, Detractio, Avaritia, Pœnitentia, Mors*, &c.

The following titles of a few of these Moralities will be sufficient to give some idea of their purport:—*Mind, Will and Understanding, Mankind, Nature, The World and the Child, Every Man, Interlude of Youth*, &c.

The Moral plays seem sooner to have undergone a change than the miracle, as we find they very shortly manifested a tendency towards the personification of real life, and an inclination to forsake the generalization of allegory, and descend to an imitation of individual character. Another kind of performance, entitled Interludes, sprung from them, of which John Heywood is thought to be the inventor. These consisted of dialogues of a satirical and moral nature, such as "Whether riches were better than love," a "Contention between liberality and prodigality," &c.

We are now approaching the production of regular comedy and tragedy, as brought to perfection by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. As early as the reign of Henry VII., the moral plays were interspersed with individual characters, and in the following reign we have undoubted proof that the idea of characterizing individual human beings had been fully developed, as the comedy of *Ralph Roister Doister* proves. But because this is the first regular piece of the kind yet discovered, it by no means proves it was the first written, though it fully explodes a notion, long and ignorantly maintained, that *Gammer Gurton's Needle* is the earliest regular drama in the English language.

The sixteenth century is, perhaps, the most eventful European history has ever recorded. The discoveries in the East and West—the progress of the Reformation—the rapid application of printing—gave an impetus to it that seems to have penetrated to all classes. A perfect rage for public exhibitions, the certain sign of an active

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age, appears to have seized the public mind. Miracle plays were still performed by those connected with the ancient ecclesiastical establishment. Moralities were also still in vogue, though their character was gradually changing by the intermixture of individual personifications. Interludes, as before said, were for a time the fashion; but bore a brief sway, being tedious and ill-calculated to attract the multitude. In addition to these, many novelties were rapidly introduced. The learned caught the mania of the period, and translations and paraphrases of the classics appeared. The French, Spanish, and Italian dramas and romances were ransacked. Our own histories were divided into scenes, and the historical play—a thing utterly unknown to the ancients, and purely *sui generis*—was produced. Never was such an age of revelry, masking, and public pleasure; all classes engaged in it, the learned and the unlearned, rich and poor, high and low—opposite religionists enlisted it in their polemical disputes—opposite statesmen in their political. Numerous works issued from the press—abusing and defending—instructing or describing—opposing or upholding it. We find privy councillors and vagabonds, the heads of colleges, Roman Catholic and Protestant divines, knights, burgesses, and bishops, all pursuing the fashionable literature. Those who enacted it were equally multifarious. Regular stage players, mimes, mummers, unthrifts, choristers, ecclesiastics, guilds of artisans, gentlemen of the inns of court, collegians, apprentices, the servants of noblemen, in fact, all classes and conditions, partook of the furor, which seems to have lasted longer, and spread wider, than any other fashionable rage yet recorded. This, however, was only the surging of the waves, out of whose mighty froth were to spring the geniuses destined to shed an imperishable glory on our stage and our literature.

In 1564, Shakespeare was born; and in 1580, Lodge is supposed to have begun writing for the stage. George Peele is also supposed to have come up in this year (1580) to London, from Oxford. Peele may be considered as one, if not the earliest, of that celebrated class of which Shakespeare was subsequently the greatest. In his dramas, for the first time, are found delicious poetry, passion, and character. Peele has the merit, as far as I can find, of being the first to cast our drama into that poetic and philosophic shape it has since retained. His plays have many incongruities, but, in them are to be

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found the divine energy of genius. In 1583, Marlowe took his bachelor's degree at Cambridge; and in 1586, Marlowe's Tamburlaine introduced blank verse to the *public* stage, and now probably Shakespeare was in London—and I think (for all, alas, is conjecture concerning this wonder of the world) writing for the stage. Mr. Collier's researches have indisputably proved he was a considerable shareholder in the Blackfriars theatre in 1589; and Meres enumerates 12 of his plays in 1598.

What an age of poetry was this—of the noblest and loftiest kind—worthy indeed to be called poetry—worthy of indicating the poet's claim to be the expositor, the teacher, and the guide of mankind.

The romantic drama was now fully developed from the elements already treated of. From the Miracle play it derived the variety of its events, the number of its *dramatis personæ*, its grotesque pageantry, and the latitude of its events and proceedings; and, above all, it derived from these sacred representations that influence with its audience, which led them to surrender themselves to the poet's will, and be led whithersoever his fancy directed. Accustomed to the most rapid changes of persons and places, and to the exemplification of miraculous occurrences, they were not, like modern audiences, in perpetual search of the real as related to the proceedings of the scene, but were implicitly bound to receive as fact all that the "maker' chose to impose on them. From the "Moralities" the Shakespearian drama derived the abstraction of its characters into species, and its eloquent dissertation; from the interludes its long and vigorously sustained dialogue; from the shows and pantomimic representations, its constant movement and life-like action; from the classical translation its more regular and condensed form, as also that individualization of the abstraction of a species which the Moralities had engendered. It is not meant to assert that all these are visible in all the productions of the Shakespearian era, nor that individual genius did not greatly impress and mould its form. But it will be found that during the sixteenth century these elements gradually unfolded themselves, and towards its close became mingled into one kind of drama. This form required the highest mental faculties for its full developement, and consequently we find it complete but in the production of one individual, though many portrayed more than one of its essential requisites in great perfection.

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Fixed on this broad and magnificent basis, the romantic English drama demands an intimate and profound knowledge of and sympathy with mankind, an exuberant fancy, a lofty and inexhaustible imagination, working on an observation various and incessant—eloquence, and the power of numbers—a judgment, delicate and vigorous, that can weave innumerable circumstances into one homogeneous mass, that shall have an enlarged and capacious unity: and to all these must be added that indefinable quality, usually denominated genius, that shall give a lively and imperishable interest to the whole.

This unequalled Drama, that has given us a literature original and unapproached, existed in its finest form for 60 years, that is, at least from 1587 to 1647, when it was destroyed by an ordinance of the fanatics, whose literal and vulgar minds were incapable of appreciating its innate excellence and power.

It is difficult to estimate the number of theatres existing during this period, or of the actors and authors connected with them. In 1587, however, there was said to be two hundred performers in London. And it must be remembered, that inferior actors frequently doubled and trebled their parts, so that the quantum for each company was about ten men, and two or three youths, to enact both male and female characters.

Of the vast number of plays produced in this 60 years, some idea may be gained from its being proved by the Manager Henslowe's note-book, that 110 new plays were produced by four companies (and those small ones) in six years; and in the following six years, 160, either original or revived with additions.—"A remarkable and unquestionable proof of the prolific talents of our old dramatists," as Mr. Collier observes, and a singular substantiation of the principle that free competition will alone produce excellence and quantity. There were also thirty popular writers in the pay of Henslowe alone at one time, not including the more generally known names of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Greene, Peele, Massinger, Beaumont, Fletcher, and many others. It also must be taken into account that not only were authors numerous, but they were equally prolific. Shakespeare left 37 known plays; Ben Jonson, 18 plays and 37 masques; Beaumont and Fletcher, 53 plays; Chapman wrote and assisted in 22, Chettle in 38, Munday in 15 (known), Middleton, 30, Massinger, 37, Ford, 20, Rowley, 20; Thomas Heywood in no less than the extraordinary number of 220, and

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Shirley (the last of the race), not less than 40. Besides these, there were numerous authors, whose works have only partially come down to us. Hundreds of plays were never printed, and of those which were, a great part have been irrecoverably lost. Even with the imperfect knowledge we can gain of this period, it may be safely stated that in this 60 years, more plays (certainly of five act plays) were produced than in the 180 years since the Restoration.

All these dramas were acted; and that they had an opportunity of being so, is the sole cause of their production. Had the performance of the intellectual drama, as at present, been confined by law to two theatres, it would have been utterly impossible they should have been produced. Literature might have been earlier turned into the stream of novel-writing, or it might have been destroyed altogether; but it could not have displayed itself in the magnificent mode it has, and England would not have had the benefit nor the honour of possessing a series of classics as original as they are excellent. Had there not been a ready mart for their works—had they not had the stimulus of competition and the chance of success before them—no writers could have devoted themselves as they did to their works. Had there only been a possibility of two successful plays being produced in a season; had they been compelled to contend with the vagaries of monopolists; the rivalry of beasts; the interests of popular actors: had incompetent rank overborne them: had they had to wait seasons for the acceptance, or even perusal of their dramas; and to compose not only to the peculiarities of actors, but to the debased taste of an audience vitiated by scenery and show; they would not, they could not, have left us what they have. They might have given us a different literature, or they might have merged in the mass in their original trades of woolcombers, bricklayers, stewards, lawyers, parsons, or schoolmasters: but they never would have formed that illustrious congregation of poets, the dramatists of England.

In 1660, on the restoration of Charles the Second, the theatre but not the drama was revived. Henceforth it was a court show—a political tool—a sensual stimulant. Charles the Second sold the freedom of his country to the French King, and the freedom of the stage to two courtiers. There is not time now to trace by facts the degradation of the stage as produced by this

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unconstitutional proceeding. It was convenient to the Crown to have the command of such an engine, and it was jobbed in all the successive reigns to courtiers—sometimes of one faction, and sometimes of the other, who made money by selling the privilege to mercenary agents who had no capacity for the office, and who pampered the vilest tastes to attract audiences: until vice became so unblushing and monstrous, that the better part of the people, led on by Jeremy Collier, insisted on its being reformed. Insipidity and show now succeeded, until it has sunk to its present degraded and injurious state.

It has got to this state, as I conceive, by the following process:—Charles the Second said there shall be but two theatres, by his patent grants; even (signs of an arbitrary government) George the Second's Acts of Parliament said also, this shall be so, but the Magistrates may license for singing and dancing, since the Papists and Pretenders will not be able to attack our new dynasty by these. But how did it fall out? The desire for theatrical representations was so irrepressible—that it overbore the law, and the Magistrates have gradually gone on interpreting music and dancing into Burlettas, Melo-drames and Farces, until we have fifteen theatres that are annually licensed contrary to the original patents and the existing operative law of the land. Thus a degrading class of drama has been raised and fostered by the government sanction until it has overpowered and entirely superseded the higher. The patent theatres themselves entered into rivalry with these inferior kind of performances; and while I speak, Drury-lane has a Concert, and Covent-garden has a play of Shakespeare's transformed into an Opera, and a Pantomime performing.

> "O! what a fall was there, my countrymen!
> Then I, and you, and all of us, fell down."

To contrast the state before and after this monopoly, I will read the titles of the plays probably performed in 1635, and those actually performed in 1835 at the patent theatres.

In 1635, omitting *all* of Shakespeare's—we had *Tamburlaine, Faustus, The Malcontent, Bussy D'Ambois, A Woman killed with Kindness, The Revenger's Tragedy, The Duchess of Malfy, Vittoria Corombona, The Lover's Melancholy, The Broken Heart, The Alchemist, Volpone, Philaster, The False One, The Two Noble Kinsmen, A Very Woman, The Virgin Martyr, The Old Law, The Maid's Revenge, &c. &c.*

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In 1835, Drury Lane: *Gustavus the Third, Lestocq, The Red Mask, Secret Service, My Neighbour's Wife, The Regent, St. George and the Dragon, King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, The Ferry and the Mill, Scan Mag, &c. A Good Looking Fellow, The Revolt of the Harem.*

Covent Garden: *Cherry and Fair Star, The Vision of the Sun, The Cataracts of the Ganges, The Somnambulist, Raymond and Agnes, The Bottle Imp, Past and Present, or, the Hidden Treasure, Crimes on Crimes, or, the Blood-stained Bandit, Timour the Tartar, Robert Macaire, Paul Clifford, &c.*

But it is gratifying to know the days of exclusive privileges are fast passing away. The patents have destroyed themselves, and their mere preventive power must be soon annulled. It is also gratifying to know that the most fashionable actor and author of the day, Mr. Macready and Sir Lytton Bulwer, have felt their injustice and injury to the art they variously profess; and have both continually and publicly registered their detestation of such unjust and injurious proceedings: the one in his evidence before the House of Commons, as well as elsewhere, by his unvarying assertions; and the other, in the bill he passed through the House in 1833, and the aid he is now ready to offer to abolish them for ever. These pledged, as they are, and backed by all the great writers and thinkers of the time, must be successful in their efforts. No one could now have the impudence to ask for such a thing as a patent, but, on the contrary, would feel his best interest in promoting to the stage, as well as everything else, perfect freedom of action, unrestrained but as all things are restrained, by the supervision of the magistrate over any species of immorality. And surely there can be no professor of the art, either actor or author, so apostate as not to endeavour to aid, to use the words of Mr. Horne, "An easy access to all the stages—all being equally permitted to accept the finest dramas they can obtain."

I will conclude my somewhat lengthened remarks with a slight view of the effect of the present state of the Drama on dramatists and actors.

The present state of affairs creates a demand for inferior productions, and increases the difficulties of the higher class of writers. The law says to all the lesser theatres—play burletta, farces, melodrames, dance, sing, fight mock battles, show wild beasts, enact *Tom and Jerry, Jack Sheppard, Madame Laffarge,* as much and as often as you please, but perform no moral or poetical plays without

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our license, and but at two or three places. The result, of course, is, that the dramatic talent and inclination is turned into the worst and meanest channel; and the taste of the public is consequently gradually lowered to it, until it becomes insensible to, and almost incapable of, enjoying the higher and purer kind. And this, too, at an age peculiarly dramatic from its activity, and from its possessing a rising set of dramatic poets, as manifested in the unacted, but published dramas, such as have not been seen since the setting of the presiding star of dramatic poetry in the murky fanaticism of 1647.

The martyrdom which a writer of the higher drama has now to endure is greater than that of any other mental labourer, not even excepting the historical painter. To compose a five-act play that shall produce its just effect is a labour which none can comprehend who have not attempted it. To produce an homogeneous work from a variety of minute incidents and events—to construct a plot that shall be interesting, but not intricate—to develope character with profundity and simplicity—to clothe the strongest throes of the passions in the immortal language and figures of the imagination—to create with such art that it shall be received for nature—is not the result of an idle outpouring of a rhapsodical brain, but the united effort of the highest faculties of man. It is not given to the grandest genius to produce such a work with ease, not even to Shakespeare. It is conceived at first rudely and dimly, and but by glimpses gradually unfolds itself to the artist. Fitfully do its noblest parts present themselves, frequently fading ere the lower faculty can fix them in words. New powers present themselves as he proceeds in his work; and the perturbed and glowing imagination "bodies forth" a variety of forms, which the nice instinct of genius has to shade into keeping with the noble whole. That which is the effect of frequent efforts and inspirations has to be fused into "one entire and perfect chrysolite," so that it may come on the auditor and spectator as the continuous emanation of one conception. Having poured forth the stores of collected observation; having given, by his instinctive genius, substance and imperishable existence to the rhapsodical visions of his imaginative faculty; having wound up his whole mental being to the strongest and most potent exercise of its combined faculties; having instructed himself in the lower art of what will affect those he addresses; —he completes his play—the result of a severe exercise of

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his highest faculties, and the produce of a mental labour great as the mind of man can undergo. In all this he has been sustained by the strong flow of his energies; and if they have ever flagged, he has renewed them by an ardour kindled at the imperishable fame of his immortal predecessors. The only reward he can know, is acted success—the knowledge of his might to move the minds of his fellow-men—the consciousness of a noble aim, and a solid reliance on his abiding fame.

When such a drama is composed the miseries of its author begins. He has first to assail the outposts of the theatre, and if he succeeds in getting even an interview with the manager, it is immediately inquired, is it domestic or classic? Has it a fine female part for Miss—? Is the leading character calculated to display the abilities of Mr. —? Is it a full piece? What are the situations? Wherein rests its force? Should it even hit all these inquiries, it must be brought down to the exact genius of every principal engaged in it. And even after pieces have been announced or rehearsed, they have been thrown back on the author's hands, with the most paltry subterfuges. The patent for legitimate drama indeed is esteemed a clog, and a dreadful interruption to the gew-gaw system.

It is not meant to blame any theatrical manager for not accepting plays unsuitable to his purpose and views, but to denounce that system which renders a living national drama impossible. At the same time, it is unworthy of any man to claim the honours of a patron of art when his conduct is that of a mere trader, and to demand the honours of a reformer and a martyr when he is only a trader and a speculator.

The regular dramatist excluded from the patent theatres, unlike other authors or artists, has no market. He cannot go from publisher to publisher, or print for himself, like the novelist, for unacted plays will not sell; and, indeed, constructed to act, are not well adapted for mere reading. He risks his labour and his genius on two throws of the die, and if they fail he loses all, whilst he sees the vaudevillist and the melodramatist have the whole field to themselves. Did not tastes merge into passions, the intellect would never be attached to the subject, but it has ever been the glory of genius to contend with apparent impossibilities, and to devote itself to art for the sake of art alone; not only forsaking the voluptuous and agreeable, but enduring all the penalties of those who forsake Mammon; and, above all, the inso-

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lence of success, more arrogant, as it is, than even the insolence of office.

The actor, with the exception of the one Bottom, the weaver, who will play the Lion's and all the other parts, is in as bad a plight as the intellectual dramatist. He shifts from theatre to theatre, and is associated, at the will of his manager, with horses and wild beasts. He is made to partake of the risk of the loss at the theatre where he is, though he has no share in the gains beyond his stipulated salary. He is the first to suffer; and it now seems a common proceeding to declare half or almost no salaries at the end of the week, provided the houses have fallen off. The injustice of making him thus participate in the risk is so much the greater, as it is incurred for the most part upon a portion of the speculation in which he is in no way concerned. The manager ventures some thousands in a spectacle, and it fails of effect, and the regular actor immediately feels it in the reduction of his salary, or perhaps its total loss. He thus runs the risk of the three companies incorporated under one management, and the failure of the operatic, melodramatic, or pantomimic company involves him in ruin. Was he playing in a theatre specially devoted to his branch of the art, he would at all events incur only the risk of his own pursuit. It may be said that he participates in their success; but this, were it so, would be equally unjust to the others; and it is not the case, as at the utmost it only enables him to gain his stipulated salary.

It is not only in pocket that the regular actor is a sufferer by the patent theatres being made mere exhibition places for music, scenery, and extraordinary performances, but he also suffers in reputation and personal independence. He is sacrificed to every novelty, and either forced out of his line, or entirely thrown aside. Even if his class of drama is performed, if he is not, or is not esteemed to be, a first-rate actor, his part is sacrificed to heighten the effect of the prominent performer; and in the new plays he is merely considered as a foil to the "leading tragedian." The system also engenders the meanest intrigues and the pettiest despotism.

The deterioration in the art of acting may also be traced to the same source. The impetus given to the melodrame and farce by the law allowing only those kind of dramas at fifteen of the eighteen theatres, has fostered them to the exclusion of the drama of character and passion; and as the country theatres principally perform them, there are no

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schools for acting left. Even in London, the actors of the patent theatres have been deteriorated by the vaudeville and farce rage. Several actors of tolerable natural ability have been educated at the minor metropolitan houses only, and, though now engaged at the regular theatres, are totally unacquainted with the real drama of the country, or, as it is technically phrased, "are not up in the stock parts." The business of the sterling plays, which is mostly traditional, and originally derived from the supervision of the dramatist, is being lost; and it was very justly observed by one of the newspapers, that the "business of *Much Ado about Nothing* was evidently no longer known at Drury-lane Theatre."

The question grows wider as I proceed, and gains strength at every thought; but I must conclude, and I cannot do so better than in the words of Sir Walter Scott.

"If it were possible," says Scott, "that the patents of the present theatres should cover four, or six, of smaller size, dedicated to the same purpose, we conceive that more good actors would be found, and more good plays written; and, as a necessary consequence, that good society would attend the theatre in sufficient numbers to enforce respect and decency. The access to the stage would be rendered easy to both authors and actors; and although this might give scope to some rant and false taste, it could not fail to call forth much excellence, that must otherwise remain latent or repressed. The theatres would be relieved of the heavy expense at present incurred, in paying performers who do not play; and in each maintaining three theatrical corps for the separate purposes of tragedy, comedy, and musical pieces; only one of which can be productive labourers on the same evening, though all must be supported and paid. According to our more thrifty plan, each of these companies would be earning at the same time the fruits of their professional industry. The hours of representation in some of these theatres might be rendered more convenient to those in high life, whilst the middling classes might enjoy a rational and classical entertainment after the business of the day.

"Such an arrangement might indeed be objected to by those who entertain a holy horror of the very name of a theatre, and who imagine impiety and blasphemy are inseparable from the drama. We have no room left to argue with such persons, or we might endeavour to prove that

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the dramatic art is in itself as capable of being directed either to right or wrong purposes, as the art of printing. It is true, that even after a play has been formed upon the most virtuous model, the man who is engaged in the duties of religion will be better employed than he who is seated in a theatre, and listening to it. To those abstracted and enrapt spirits, who feel or suppose themselves capable of remaining constantly involved in heavenly thoughts, sublunary amusement may justly seem frivolous. But the mass of mankind are not so framed. The Supreme Being, who claimed the seventh day as his own, allotted the other six days of the week for purposes merely human. When the necessity of daily labour is removed, and the call of social duty fulfilled, that of moderate and timely amusement claims its place, as a want inherent in our nature. To relieve this want, and fill up the mental vacancy, games are devised, books are written, music is composed, spectacles and plays are invented and exhibited. And if these last have a moral and virtuous tendency; if the sentiment expressed tend to rouse our love of what is noble, and our contempt of what is mean; if they unite hundreds in a sympathetic admiration of virtue, abhorrence of vice, or derision of folly; it will remain to be shown how far the spectator is more criminally engaged, than if he had passed the evening in the idle gossip of society, in the feverish pursuits of ambition, or in the unsated and insatiable struggle after gain—the graver employments of the present life, but equally unconnected with our existence hereafter."

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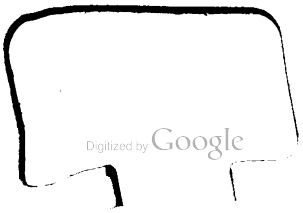
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